

In the Shadow of Young Boys in Flower by Quentin

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Summary:

“Where is Mike?”

It was the first question Will asked after he woke up and saw Nancy standing there, with her hands covering her mouth as if she had just seen something that shook her to her core. But no Mike. The milliseconds before the answer each pierced his skin like the sharpest of needles, injecting cold terror into him.

“Mike is fine, sweetie,” his mom told him, smiling, her shirt and hair soaked in sweat outlining deep lines in her relieved face. “He is with the rest of your friends at our place, waiting for us and Eleven.”

In the Shadow of Young Boys in Flower

Author's Note:

Thanks to my lovely [star](#) for encouraging me to write and later for betaing it.

I wanted to explore what it would be like for Will to deal with Eleven being actually there and shifting Mike's attention from him.

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Will’s stomach sank.

“Eleven?”

“Yes, she is back. She went with Hopper to do what you told us, to close the gate.” Jonathan answered and sat down heavily on the floor by the bed Will was on, looking much older than Will remembered him.

The news didn’t calm Will, rather they whirled in his head, unable to settle down and he pushed them away, not wanting to deal with any of it.

He sloped back on the pillows and exhaled.

...

Days dragged and dragged, following the slow fall of leaves as Will’s

friends waited excitedly for the Spring Ball. Dustin and Lucas kept thinking about the best ways to invite girls to dance, their catchphrases growing more and more ridiculous as they talked.

“So, how about ‘Why don’t you dance with me, baby?’, huh?” Dustin asked adjusting his imaginary tie and winking. “Who could say no to that?”

Everyone snorted.

“Yeah, no, Dustin, no girl would want to dance with you when she hears that,” Lucas said with a smirk from the couch.

“Well, what would you say, then?” Dustin answered and then turned to Mike. “What do you say to El, Mike?”

Will sighed and turned his head to look out of the window. The view he had grown so used to seemed more interesting with its almost naked trees losing their last leaves with every shake of the wind than the constant talk about girls, romance, and dating. Somehow, with all that has been going on, he missed the moment when their routines changed and became about this instead.

“I just ask her if she wants to dance with me.”

Will turned back to watch Mike unable to contain his genuine joy.

“Yeah, but that’s because El likes you!” Lucas exclaimed and flopped his hands in irritation. Mike’s cheeks grew red as he sat there continuing to smile happily.

Will sat across from him, not saying anything and watched Mike with a small, polite smile. Mike’s feelings radiated from the inside and were obvious to everyone in the room. Will was supposed to be *happy* for him, he didn’t know why it bothered him so much, why he had to convince himself that he was. He was, wasn’t he?

He was.

Mike introduced Eleven to him after a couple of days of rest that his mom demanded. His dimples on full display as he tried not to be weird about it, while Will and Eleven assessed each other. She was

quiet, like him, observed him intently and nodded as Will uttered a quiet, shy *Hi*.

“They would never admit it but Will is Mike’s best friend. They know each other from kindergarten.” Lucas chimed in, barging through the door with Dustin at his heels, their hands full of food. The words lacked animosity, and were just Lucas stating a well-known fact.

For the rest of their evening Eleven occasionally stole glances at Will, when she wasn’t busy looking at Mike and following the conversation. Will, on the other hand, couldn’t wait until the evening was over and he could go back home to his room and his drawings. Mike’s basement had never felt this small and stifling as when the rest told him the story of his disappearance that he had heard countless times before, as when they kept asking Eleven about her powers. Will knew by now, she had to be amazing in order for Mike to be so infatuated.

Will knew that.

He wasn’t possessed by Demogorgon anymore. It was hopefully behind him in reality, even if his subconsciousness couldn’t let it go and reminded him about it with the nightmares. But, after everything, they were just nightmares and as terrifying as they were, he always woke up in cold sweat and stayed awake after, his sadness and fear spilling on the pillow as he wished he could talk to Mike but he never did.

Will called Mike during the day, Mrs. Wheeler’s gentle voice answering with *Oh, he is not home, honey, he went to see—Jane*, before promising to tell Mike.

Once. Twice.

Mike never called back.

Will retreated and gave him space, patient despite his growing unease and melancholy that clang him like a shadow and never seemed to retreat.

Even at school, where Eleven—Jane now—was catching up and not

participating in any of their classes, Will and Mike, if—so rarely—left alone together, talked about their classes and an occasional movie that the whole group went to see together but never more than that. Will, at loss of what to do, pretended like nothing was wrong.

Time passed.

They celebrated Dustin and Mike's fourteenth birthdays, Lucas' was coming soon too, while he, the youngest of the group, had to wait longer.

...

His mom came home one day and saw him there, sitting alone and staring at the TV. She observed him carefully from the kitchen, then sighed and sat next to him. She turned the tv off and Will looked at her.

"Hey, sweetie, I saw your friends in town. It looked like they were going to catch a movie," Will turned his head away and she gently took his hand. "Why aren't you with them?"

"No reason," Will answered, still not looking at her. "I didn't want to come."

"Why didn't you?" she continued softly. "Did you have an argument with them?"

Will shook his head.

"No."

His mom drew him closer and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Her closeness, her familiar smell that he'd grown to cherish as a safe place made his eyes sting.

"Sweetheart, you know you can tell me anything." She cradled his face in her hands and gently caressed his cheeks. "What happened?"

"It's nothing." His bottom lip trembled, sorrow building in his chest, as he confessed. "It's not the same anymore. They always come with girls whenever we go, and if the girls aren't there, that's the only

thing they talk about.”

He couldn't relate to them.

His eyes welled up.

“I don't think I belong with them anymore. I don't know what to talk to them about, I feel like I'm intruding on their fun.” They were his only friends. Hot tears followed down his cheeks, reaching his mother's hands. She gently wiped them away. “I feel like a freak when I am with them now.”

“Oh, sweetie.” She whispered, upset by her son's distress and drew him into a hug, letting him cry into her shoulder.

“You are not a freak. Don't ever think that.” Her hand caressed his nape as she talked. “Your friends like you. They do! They are just growing up, and you will soon follow them. You will find a person you like and won't feel strange among your friends anymore.”

Will clang to her, silent, afraid to tell her he didn't want to find anyone. He just wanted his friends back. He wanted Mike back.

“I noticed Mike is not around anymore. Is this why you are so upset? Try to spend time with him alone. Invite him over. I am sure you will still have fun together.”

Will didn't want to explain why he couldn't. It was as if there was a wall between him and Mike now. Their hollow conversations bounced off it, never breaking through.

“Yeah.” Will said, hoarse, face still hidden in her shoulder. “Maybe.”

His mom hugged him closer and whispered *my beautiful baby is growing up*, into his hair before kissing his forehead and releasing him. Will continued to sit there on the couch with legs drawn to his chest, contemplating, as she stood up and went to prepare dinner.

...

Nothing really changed.

...

Will's birthday came and his mom convinced him to invite everyone to their place. Hopper brought Jane and helped his mom prepare everything, they sat on couch for the rest of the evening, smiling at each other as they chatted.

Will accepted everyone's presents graciously, thanking them even if he wasn't sure why Max would give him a book on dinosaurs. He wasn't seven anymore.

Will paused as he opened Dustin's present.

It was another book.

"How to Find The Right Girl, Dustin, really?" Will turned to look at him, embarrassed.

Everyone started laughing as Dustin spluttered and exclaimed, "What?! I thought it was a good idea, the book is full of great advice. If it wasn't for this book, I would have never started dating girls."

"You are the only one without a girlfriend, dude," Lucas added in agreement, dragging on 'dude' as Max elbowed him in the stomach.

"You don't have to read the book, if you don't want to," Max offered to him apologetically.

"No, read the book, Will. We should find you a girlfriend. It's a great idea!" Mike declared, putting his drink on the table. Heaviness, like a rain cloud, settled in his chest. Will turned his head to take a short look at Mike's beaming face, wishing he could throw the book at him, and then turned away without saying anything.

"Is there anyone you are interested in, Will?" Eleven joined in, suddenly, and Will went still. They all looked at him while he didn't say anything.

"Tell us, Will, tell us! Is it Alice from our class?"

Everyone started yelling names of the girls they thought Will probably liked. Making plans for him and taking turns at reading

quotes from the book. And Will sat there, shaking his head, trying to appear normal. Not looking at Mike who seemed as invested into the whole thing as others.

He didn't want to talk to Mike at all anymore.

...

Spring came and Mom started getting Jonathan ready for college. He was going to NYU and Mom worried over him surviving alone out there.

"It's going to be fine, Mom. It's just college," Jonathan reassured her every time she would start.

Even if Jonathan didn't spend so much time at home, after he started dating Nancy, Will still came to him whenever he was home to listen to music together and talk. Jonathan always let him. In the safe space of Jonathan's room, alone in the house after the darkness had settled in, he was used to sitting on the floor by his bed and drawing whatever Jonathan asked for while Jonathan would introduce him to some new band that he was into.

Without Jonathan, it wouldn't be the same. He was one of the people Will could still talk to. He became someone else with his friends, someone Will couldn't recognise. Whenever he was with them, he would laugh at things he didn't find funny, nod at things things they said about girls even though he felt nothing.

Other times he would hang out with Dustin, whose stupid book got him—Dustin—into trouble more often than not, and they would play games and wait until Lucas joined in, sometimes together with Max.

"That's just how love is. You wouldn't understand until you feel it," Lucas would say to him whenever he came alone and Will would mention Mike.

...

Summer came and Jonathan left. Before he did, Mom sat them down and confessed where she had been disappearing in the evenings—she had been seeing Hopper, no, *Jim*, for months now and they were

thinking of moving in together.

Moving in with Jane. Here.

She looked so hopeful and happy, Will couldn't say anything against it.

Jim, easy-going as he was, gave him a cassette player in an attempt to appease Will and win him over. He didn't have to. Will didn't mind either of them; he didn't particularly want to live with them but Jim made his mom happy and nothing else mattered.

He spent his summer with Lucas and Jane. It was fun at times, when Lucas didn't talk about Max who went to spend time with her father in California. Mike and Dustin went to camps their parents sent them to. They both complained at length about it before they left but they had to go nevertheless.

Jane was left with him, she never talked about Mike and that was something that Will liked about her.

She studied a lot, hoping to catch up faster and Will helped her whenever she had problems with something. Explained it patiently as they sat in the sun outside.

"Do you remember the Upside Down?" Jane asked him, out of the blue, as the sun was setting, filling everything with red light. They were waiting for his mom to come back.

"Yes." Will wasn't used to talking about it anymore, sometimes the group did but he never shared how he still vividly remembered the terror he felt there.

"Do you dream about it too?"

"Yes," Will admitted and looked at her. "Do you?"

She nodded and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

"I don't like thinking about it. I felt...terror." Will almost broke the pencil he was twirling in his hands as he confessed. "Was it the same for you?"

"I was scared, yes," Jane answered while she stared at the setting sun which was already hiding in the trees. "I didn't want to be there. But I hoped I could do something about it."

"With your powers?"

"Yes."

Jane was unique. She saved him. Will liked her just for that.

"Thank you," Will said, slowly.

"For what?" asked Jane, her eyes blinking as she sat up straight.

"For saving me." Will felt like he needed to say that.

"Of course, Will."

They both watched the sky turn purple.

"Do you want to watch TV together while we wait?" Will asked as he was getting up. He reached out his hand to help Jane stand up as well.

"Yes!" She exclaimed, taking his hand and pushing him back down while she stood up quickly and ran towards the house. "I choose!"

...

He was home alone when the phone rang. Will walked up to it, thinking maybe he shouldn't answer but then nobody besides his family called anyway. He picked it up.

"Hello?"

The static was the only answer at first.

"Will?" The voice on the other end greeted him. It was—

"Mike?" Everything inside him clenched. A month without him and he almost learned how to deal with it.

Almost.

"Hi." Mike sounded unsure. Will knew Mike most probably didn't call to talk to him but he clang to the phone anyway.

"Do you want to speak to Jane?" Will asked, trying not to sound bitter. He still switched between Eleven and Jane, he got used to calling her Jane now, but Mike never said it. Mike introduced him to Eleven.

"I...No," Mike stammered. "I mean, yes."

Will clenched his teeth and exhaled, "She is not here. Try again later."

"I can't—It's okay. They gave me some time to call my parents and I —" Mike started to say and stopped when he heard someone say *You have five minutes while I am on a smoke break, Mr. Wheeler* and then the door closed with a ding.

"Will," Mike breathed again into the phone.

Will could almost feel Mike's hot breath on his ear. He dragged the phone cord with him as he slid down on the floor. The phone pressed tightly to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"It's just strange to be here. Without you," Mike confessed and Will held his breath, heart stuttering.

Mike continued, "Without all of you."

Will nearly stood up to hang up the phone. It was unfair that Mike was talking to him like nothing had changed, like he had been calling him like this for the past year.

Not even once.

He couldn't do it.

"When are you coming back?" Was the only thing Will's racing mind could think of.

“In two weeks,” Mike replied. “Will you be in Hawkins?”

“Where would I go?” Will asked him in return, confused. “Of course.”

“Good. I want to see you.”

“Yeah?” He breathed into the phone.

“Yes,” Mike said like it pained him. “Do you want to see me?”

“I...” Will froze, lost, and uttered. “I think so.”

“You think so?”

Will hid his face in his knees and admitted, “I don’t know.”

They both went quiet after that and Will could hear Mike’s quiet breathing on the other side as he waited for Mike to say something else but he didn’t.

They only had a couple of minutes and they were wasting their time. Mike should have called his parents.

Not knowing if he would ever get another moment, like this, with Mike where the whole world disappeared far away, like nothing else existed but the rooms they were in, their bodies, hearts, heads, ears, and mouths, and the phones that connected them through cords and palpable electricity, even if they were apart for so long, even if Will didn’t know if he wanted to see Mike, alone, there was something about this moment that moved Will, something strong enough to bypass his cautious self, to feel Mike’s presence on the other end as if they stood next to each other, touching, and to ask—

“Mike. Mike,” Will begged for his attention, name sweet on his tongue, and Mike reacted with a croaking—

“Yeah?”

He had to ask this. Will had been waiting, biding his time, thinking, the question heavy on his mind. It was as simple as the answer had to be definite.

Redefining.

“Are we friends?” His shaking voice travelled to the other side.

Silence followed and the corridor seemed suddenly much darker, without the setting sun playing in it.

“Of course, Will,” Mike said finally, voice heavy. “What else?”

...

Two weeks passed in an agonising pace, slowing down every time Will started counting the days and speeding up when he was lost in imagining spending time with Mike again.

Then Mike came back.

Trying to busy himself with reading, drawing, anything to distract from even considering going to Mike’s place, Will spent most time doing nothing, lying on his bed and listening to every sound in the house. The creaking of doors sent him upright every time, every little sound was hyper analysed until Will wasn’t sure whether what he was hearing was real anymore.

Until a couple of days after Mike came back someone knocked on the door. Will jumped from his bed and adjusted his clothes in a hurry. He waited a second, taking a deep breath and listening in to hear if no one was walking down the corridor to open it.

No one was.

Okay.

Will walked through the cool corridor until he reached the door, hovering over the handle for a moment and then opened it.

Mike stood there, eyes wide open as they looked at each other. He was taller than the last time Will had seen him, of course he was, he was always taller than Will even if Will did some growing of his own this summer. His shoulders were broader, the t-shirt that he had been wearing for the past year was now tight around his arms. It suited him like this, in a careless and youthful way, highlighted his lean and

athletic posture no doubt improved at the camp through swimming in the lake in the open afternoon sun that left its signature with a cluster of freckles on his bronze skin and light streaks in his disheveled hair that almost shimmered in the warm wind.

Mike blinked slowly and opened his mouth.

“Hi.”

“Hello,” Will answered, unsteady. He couldn’t quite believe it.

“Is El home? I wanted to see her.”

And like that, Will knew he was standing right in front of Mike and nowhere else. Mike stood there with his hands in his shorts’ pockets, shoulders hunched, and refused to glance at him for longer than a millisecond after requesting to see Jane.

The gush of wind which was warm a minute ago, now felt cold, raising goosebumps on Will’s skin.

“Of course,” Will said, not recognising his own voice. “What else?”

Mike looked up to watch him with his searching eyes and Will stared back expressionless.

“Is it Mike? Tell him he can come to my room in a minute!” Jane shouted and Will flinched.

Mike stood there silently, examining him as Will stepped away and let him pass, clutching the door with one hand, the other clenched in a fist as he closed the door behind with a bit too much force than needed and went to his room without glancing back at Mike whose gaze was burning through his back until he reached his room and closed the door behind him.

He put his headphones on, not willing to hear anything they could be doing and popped one of the tapes Jonathan lent him until Thanksgiving into the cassette player. He drew and drew and drew until his hands were black from holding the chalk and rubbing it in, trying to perfect shapes. He wanted to learn to do it on his own because he knew they couldn’t afford art classes. Not satisfied with

them in the least, Will threw them on the floor and wept.

...

Will shoved angrily everything into his bag on the first day of school, not prepared to start seeing Mike every day again. It ate at him, having Mike so close but it being meaningless, their encounters reduced to hellos and goodbyes, sometimes not even that, and ignoring, never addressing each other but both putting an effort to talk to others in the group.

Dustin gushed about a new girl, Selena, in their class and all Will had noticed about her at first was her long dark hair and a blue denim jacket that she always seemed to have on. She sat next to him on the left and drew in her notebook, not even trying to pretend she was listening to the teachers.

“Do you think I should ask her out?” Dustin whispered to the whole group as Selena passed in front of them after class. “Do you think she would say yes?”

Will yawned. Nothing had really changed.

He had no desire to go home after school, not knowing if Mike would follow Jane there. Instead, he went to the library and decided to stay there as long as possible. Selena was there on most days than not, she sat on the terrace of the second floor with a notebook and a pen. Sometimes Will would go and sit next to her, curious about her drawings but never feeling brave enough to start a conversation. She would check the book she had on the table now and again whenever she was drawing and Will craned his neck trying to see what it was.

Until Selena pitied him enough and asked, “Do you draw too?”

After that, they started whispering to each other about drawing in the empty corner of the library. Selena showed him the book Will had almost gotten a crick in the neck over and recommended a couple of others on shapes. They started going to the library together, always sitting on the second floor as they practiced.

By the time the first month of the school ended, Will had spent more

time with Selena than with the group, never really mixing them up, hurrying away from them with a quick goodbye and never returning their confused glances. Everyone kept asking him why he didn't want to spend time with them, everyone except Mike, who, most of the time, still refused to look at him.

...

Selena wasn't there after he looked up, having been stopped by Max who asked him about homework right after their last class. He walked to the library and found her there, sitting in their usual place as usual. She was turned to face the first floor from the terrace and Will who had never seen her do that realised Selena was drawing someone below. He tiptoed up to her and with a whispered *Hey*, he sat down. She had a file on the table full of different pieces of paper, some bigger than others that stuck from one end or another or both, the file's grey thick paper matted and cracked in many places, showing the years of usage.

He had never seen her portfolio before.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing to the drawings.

"Yeah," Selena replied distractedly without looking and continued to raptly watch the first floor.

Will opened the file and looked at the stuff inside. Selena was truly talented, her drawings full of detail and style which he couldn't see in his own. Her parents had sent her to actual art classes before and promised to do it again if she kept her grades up. She drew people, predominantly, unlike him, her file full of portraits of women and girls he knew—

Will went through the first ten drawings, five of them were of Emily, a girl they shared History with. They were careful drawings too, Emily's hair looked like she could step out of the paper any minute and Will would believe it. How much time did she spend on them?

Will peeked over her shoulder carefully to see what she was drawing. It wasn't ready enough to see exactly who it was at this point, instead, he followed Selena's gaze and saw Emily sitting there with a

friend.

Will didn't know if Selena had other friends. He had never seen them. Did she want to become friends with her? Was she making her portrait to impress Emily with her skills?

Will went through other drawings, many of them of Emily until he reached the last one. It was clearly Emily again except this time she was sitting in a shell next to the sea with her hair long and flowing, dressed in a tunic. The letters at the bottom said Venus and didn't it mean it had something to do with love? Will stared at it as his heart beat faster. Was Selena—?

No.

It couldn't be.

Those things didn't happen. Will heard about those people, had been bullied with the words which described them, had imagined them being wrong, abnormal at their core, not someone like this, like Selena. He looked up and saw her staring at him, her eyes big as saucers in realisation of what he had seen. She clutched her current drawing, knuckles white and opened her mouth to say—

"It's not...It's not what you—" She swallowed. "I'm not—"

Unable to finish and realising how it made everything worse, what it meant, panicked tears formed in her eyes and started falling the moment after while she continued to watch him with wide eyes, terrified and speechless.

And Will—

Will liked Selena, she was quiet and smart and often very funny. There was nothing wrong with her, even if she liked Emily the way girls weren't supposed to. And if it weren't so wrong for Selena, maybe it wasn't wrong for boys to like boys too.

Will thought of Mike. If he had to choose a boy he could ever think in this way, it would be Mike. Mike whom he couldn't let go, whose silence and ignoring him hurt more than any other friend in their group. Mike who he couldn't stop thinking about after almost a year

of not speaking properly, who he should have just forgotten about but always returned to in his mind. Mike who placed a hand on his own when Will was scared and made Will warm in a way that the Demogorgon couldn't comprehend.

Will swallowed thickly, heart beating so fast it was about to jump out of his chest any minute now.

He had been fighting it for so long and yet Mike never left his mind. Everything that Mike did affected him now more than before. Before they were apart and distant. It was as if Mike's existence was tied to his own without Mike feeling the same. When Eleven came back and Mike forgot about him—just him, not the group, he left Will with them as if he was sure Will would be fine without him or perhaps it didn't even cross his mind (and wasn't it worse?)—Mike seemed fine, *was* fine while Will wasn't.

Maybe, it was something else then. Maybe, if Selena was allowed to like Emily, maybe—Will was allowed to like Mike too. Maybe, it was ok to be like *that*. To be—gay.

Will moved his hand hesitantly and covered Selena's hand with his own.

"It's ok," He whispered, earnest, giving her a reassuring smile. "It's ok. Don't cry."

Selena looked him through the tears, eyebrows raised in question as if she wasn't ready to believe he was telling the truth.

Will looked around at the empty seats around them before leaning closer to her and whispering—

"I get it."

...

Will couldn't fall asleep that night. Images of Mike flooded his mind, refusing to leave. Was he sure he was like that?

Gay .

He spent a long time thinking about Mike—wanting to talk to him, to sit next to him, for their bodies to touch in a way they were comfortable to touch before, to put his hand on top of Mike's the way Mike did to him once, to feel Mike wrap a hand around his shoulder in a comforting gesture but he didn't know if those things were—romantic.

Will never thought about...kissing him. He never wanted to kiss anyone. Will squeezed his eyes shut and felt his breath stutter as he tried to imagine, almost jumping out of his skin.

The image kept turning over and over in his head until it became a haze of senseless pictures—coming closer to Mike, standing right in front of him, putting a hand on his shoulder to ground himself as they both leaned in—

Mike running away from him and Will just standing there, unable to take after him, just watching him run and chanting *we're friends, we're friends, we're friends*.

...

"You wouldn't believe who I saw in the library yesterday!" Lucas hollered as he came through the door to Mike's basement.

"What?!" Dustin and Max exclaimed together nearly deafening Will who was sitting between them.

Lucas climbed downstairs, and with a dramatic spin pointed at Will. "You!"

"Will?" asked Max, sounding disappointed. "Big news. He is there all the time."

"No," Lucas continued like he was sharing a conspiracy. "I mean yes, but do you know who he was with?"

Will reached to loosen the collar of his shirt.

"With Selena!"

Everyone turned to look at him except for Mike who continued to

stare at his comic book instead.

“I saw them! I don't think they noticed me seeing as those lovebirds were busy holding hands and whispering in each other's ears.”

Will's cheeks burned and he wished the ground would swallow him. That wasn't what happened. Lucas, however, looked smug at being the only one who had seen it and now could tell everyone about it.

“Oh boy, Selena? I'm not even mad. I'm not even mad,” Dustin muttered and clapped Will on his shoulder, knocking the wind out of him.

“So, are you together?” Jane asked with a smirk from her place next to Mike who turned to look at her with a grimace in return.

“No!” Will collected himself. “It's not like that.”

“How is it then?”

Will turned to look at Max who gave him an encouraging smile.

“We are just friends.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Right.”

“Friends who hold hands. Do you know many of those?”

Will clenched his fists and said nothing.

“Congratulations, Will,” Mike said when everyone calmed down. The disinterested tone of his voice made Will's chest tighten. Didn't Mike care at all? Will had known him for so long he knew when Mike didn't sound sincere. “I started to think you never would.”

...

Will didn't really want to go to the Snow Ball knowing how boring it would be for him when his friends would dance with girls in pretty outfits and he would be left alone there, without Selena who refused

to come, confessing to him that she hated wearing dresses. But he promised everyone he would go.

He waited until everyone disappeared when slow songs started—Mike as usual went with Jane, dancing slowly and talking about something quietly, their faces close to each other but too far away from him to see their expressions. Max and Lucas danced happily closer to him, oblivious to the world. He couldn't find Dustin until the crowd moved to the right and there he was, in the center. And Will couldn't believe his eyes as an older girl smiled at Dustin who gingerly clasped her waist.

Oh well.

He couldn't leave yet. Jim was picking both him and Jane in two hours but standing there, alone, with no dancing partner and unwilling to dance with anyone if someone was actually to come up to him and ask, Will was left with unease in his stomach at this parade of happiness and content that so clearly excluded him standing there in corner, as if that corner was a marking spot.

The mark of someone who didn't belong.

Even if he were to find a boy one day—and Will didn't dare to think it could be Mike as much as his heart longed for him, he refused to think about him in this way, to wish Mike not to belong with everyone but with him alone—he would still belong in the corner, they both would, unable to dance with each other in public.

Heart heavy in his chest, Will walked out of the hall and pushed the door to get some fresh air.

There was no one out there in the field in front of him. He remembered that field, how could he not. Sometimes, when he was running during gym class he would forget where he was and run faster, blind until he would see a familiar face and look behind him to see no monster.

The field looked empty now.

“Would you like some whiskey?”

Will whirled around and saw a boy, older than he was by about a year. He had seen him around, his smooth face familiar enough but he had never talked to him until now.

The boy reached for the breast pocket inside of his leather jacket and took out a flask.

“I’m Sam,” Sam opened the flask and took a sip, grimacing at the taste.

Will stared at him for a second and then remembered himself.

“I’m Will.”

He watched him take another sip. “Aren’t you worried people will notice?”

Sam shrugged and extended his hand, offering the flask to him. Will took it hesitantly, their cold fingers brushing in the process, unsure whether it was a good idea.

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“We get kicked out of school?” Will raised his eyebrows but it didn’t seem important anymore, if they got caught it wouldn’t be worse than being in the Upside Down. The cold metal of the flask felt smooth in his hands and something in Will wanted to do this. He opened the flask and took a sniff. He didn’t know what whiskey was exactly but it smelled weird.

He brought it to his mouth slowly, Sam watching him as he took a sip. It tasted vile, one small sip burning his throat and stomach.

He coughed.

“Where did you get this?” he rasped while giving it back.

Sam smirked, face proud. “Took it from my dad’s cabinet. He wouldn’t notice if some of it is gone. He has so many bottles in there.” He took another sip. “My dad collects whiskey, you see.”

Will nodded. He guessed it was something dads did.

They stood in the crisp evening air, chatting about nothing. Sam hated school, couldn't wait until he could get out of Hawkins, there was nothing in it for him and Will half-heartedly agreed. They finished the flask together, Will made sure to have less but it was enough, he swayed when he tried to take a step, almost falling on the grass but Sam put him upright with the arm on his elbow and when Will looked up to thank him, they were, all of a sudden, standing much closer than before.

Will's heart started to beat faster and he shivered in the cold air as he and Sam watched each other—quietly—not moving or saying anything. Sam was a nice looking guy, Will thought distractedly, skinny and blond, he towered over him slightly and Will felt goosebumps raise on his skin as Sam stepped in even closer.

“I just—“ Sam said quietly, voice hoarse in the cold night. “I always wanted to try—“

He didn't finish his sentence and leaned in, closing the distance between them. Will went still. The warm press of Sam's mouth against his overwhelmed him, the smell of whiskey all around them. Time seemed to stop to a halt. The kiss didn't feel wrong or strange or unnatural or almost everything that Will still counted for it to feel like, and the possibility it was just a phase disappeared into thin, chilly air, as Will opened his mouth slightly and moved in closer, tugging on Sam's wrist.

The door creaked and they both jumped apart, turning to look in the direction of the sound.

Nothing.

Relieved, Will stepped away and let go of Sam's wrist.

“I gotta go—“ Sam muttered as he stepped back, trembling hands gripping the flask.

“Yes. Me too,” Will agreed, shaken to his core by an incident that took less than a minute. They shared a small smile, both knew they would probably never share this moment again, never take a moment to talk to each other about it or at all, and yet they were connected

by this short moment—defining for both of them even if both weren't prepared to admit it now—on a dark night in a field in Hawkins, Indiana.

Sam turned and went quickly indoors, leaving Will alone with his racing mind.

It felt right. It felt *right*.

When Will walked back in, the group was sitting together on the chairs. They waved at him and he came closer, hoping no one would notice how his body refused to cooperate and walk in a straight line. He put his sweating hands in the pockets and muttered a quick *Hey* to all of them before noticing Mike's odd glance from his seat.

Will's heart jumped and he swallowed.

Jane and Max were nowhere in sight. Were they all tired of dancing?

"Where were you? We wanted to start looking for you," Dustin interrupted his thoughts and stood up from his chair before leaning in to hear his answer better. Will almost leaned back, reflexive, but caught himself—remembering—and relaxed slightly.

"I was outside."

The raspiness wasn't fully gone from his voice yet.

Dustin eyed him in suspicion for a brief moment before leaning closer and taking a very obvious sniff. He must have smelled something because his eyes widened comically and he gripped Will's arms.

"Have you been drinking?!"

Will grimaced. Dustin loud words were bound to be heard by others.

Lucas and Mike both stood up quickly with incredulous stares. Will shushed him as they all stepped closer.

He felt his cheeks redden as they whispered *What?! to him*, suddenly aware of the fact that his lips still tasted like whiskey, he licked them trying to get rid of the taste and to squirm less under everyone's

attentive gazes. Could they just stop paying attention to him? It was disconcerting.

"A student outside shared it with me."

"Is he still there?" Lucas asked, looking ready to run there himself and get some. Will shook his head, afraid to look around and find Sam somewhere. He didn't know what to say to him.

Dustin and Lucas appeared disappointed at that but quickly recovered when Lucas added, "The ball will be over in an hour. How will you go back? You stink of whiskey!"

"Shit."

Will tried to take a step in panic but ended up swaying again, almost bumping into Mike who took a step back to avoid it. Will should have expected that but it stung a little, the meaning behind that step easily decoded into whatever they were *not* anymore.

"Sit down. We are going to get you something to drink. Maybe Jim won't notice it then. He is a cop, Christ!" Dustin muttered and started walking in the direction of drinks, dragging Lucas with him.

Will awkwardly sat down on one of the vacant chairs, feeling Mike's eyes on him as Mike sat down across from him, arms crossed over his chest. When he looked up, Mike looked away, lips pressed together.

They both didn't say anything. All Will wanted was for Mike to stop looking at him like that, like Will did something Mike didn't approve of. Because Mike didn't know, *couldn't* know—all he knew was that Will was drunk and if Mike disapproved of that then he could go to hell.

"What?" Will asked, irritated and hyper aware of Mike glancing at him when he thought Will wasn't looking. He always did it now, he never sat close to him anymore.

"Nothing," Mike answered, face unreadable as he continued to steal glances at him throughout the evening, Jane nowhere in sight, until they all went home.

...

Fucking Math Will thought as he copied Selena's homework, sweetening the boring task by listening to the Police and mouthing the words. Languages, History, Art all of that was fine but when it came to Math he just couldn't pay fucking attention.

Someone touched his shoulder.

Will jumped and turned around in his chair, taking his headphones off.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you!"

Mike stood there, among the mess of Will's room, eyebrows furrowed, the arm that touched him going in his pocket. He must have been visiting Jane.

"What are you doing here?" Will asked, surprised at his own harsh tone.

"I knocked but you didn't hear it," Mike gestured vaguely towards his headphones, apologetic, and then lowered his head. "So I came in."

"No," Will said carefully, turning around fully and sitting up straight. "Why are you here?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Bullshit.

Will crossed his arms over his chest and squinted at him. The ambiguousness hidden in the silences, in conversations never taking place, fuelled by anxious pretence from both sides at different times, sometimes simultaneously, keeping up appearances but never truly facing what was going on had been losing its appeal lately.

"You have been coming here for how long, three months now? And you've never done this before."

Mike's cheeks reddened as he stood there shuffling his feet, out of place in Will's room despite that he had come here so many times

before.

“I—” Mike stammered, hand going to his neck. “I just came there to pick up some of my things.”

“So what, Jane dumps you and you suddenly remember that I live here too?”

Yes, Jane told him about it. A week ago, she came to his room at night, climbed on his bed and confessed that she told Mike she didn’t want to be his girlfriend anymore.

Mike’s face grew paler and then closed off.

“Why are you—” He started in reply, eyes wide and piercing. “Why are you being like this?”

Will stood up, tension thrumming in his veins like a storm building under his skin, and uncrossed his arms putting his hands curled in fists on display. He stepped closer to Mike, continuing to watch him carefully and felt Mike tense up without backing away.

“Do you think we are friends now?” He sneered, a sick feeling in his stomach washing over him at the admission that had been long hanging in the air. Before—when it was hidden—there was uncertainty and now—when it was finally out—it was also finally, painfully true. “Fuck you.”

Mike’s whole face changed, he suddenly looked younger and less certain than he had looked for a long time. He opened his mouth and then closed it. He swallowed and just stood there, silent, breathing harshly through his nose, right in front of him, so close, Will had to extend his hand just a bit and he could shove or punch him in his trembling fury.

Mike watched him searchingly for a bit and then his face went hard.

“Fuck you too.”

He turned around and left.

The tension that filled the room was gone now. Will stood in it,

wallowing in the moment, their friendship now officially a thing of the past, to be remembered with bitterness at its pathetic end.

Will walked to the bed and sat on it heavily. Telling Mike off was like plunging in the ocean, an unknown terrain without a shore in sight, with salty water reaching his eyes, nose and the inside of his mouth. Will rubbed angrily at his eyes and cheeks trying to come up for air but it didn't help, he was only sinking deeper.

...

"I am glad you invited Selena over," Lucas called out to him as Will and Jane came to Mike's basement and saw everyone except Mike there already. "I can see why you have been choosing her over us."

"I—"

Uneasiness prickled at his skin. He wasn't avoiding them on purpose, not to make them feel bad or unwanted. Instead it was him who felt like the wrong piece of the puzzle, trying to fit from every corner and failing every time.

"It's all good, dude," Lucas smiled and came over, patting his shoulder. "We've all been there. Right, Mike?"

Will smiled back weakly and turned to see Mike who just came in carrying pizza boxes and was putting them down on the table.

"Yeah? I'm not sure I heard the whole thing. What—"

But the rest was drowned in the excited noises of Max, Jane and Dustin who noticed the pizza and rushed to it, pushing each other to take the best places at the table.

"Will, come on!"

Dustin shouted impatiently and didn't bother to spend any more time on waiting. He opened one of the boxes and inhaled deeply the warm smell of cheese and salami.

Will stood near the stairs and thought of running back up and away, never coming here again, hiding in the forest, its dangers be damned,

until they all finished school and went away. In that moment, the monsters one could find in Hawkins were as distant as the rest of the world. Until they weren't—Mike who until this point ignored the very existence of him—shot him a sharp look that told him to hurry. Its coldness reminded him of their shattered closeness, not yet completely forgotten but without its warmth in every interaction.

The table had never been so far away. He took a step closer, resigned, looking at the last free place between Dustin and Mike on the couch and crawled in.

There was not enough space. They all sat pressing against each other, shoulders to shoulders or hip to hip, or both, but the rest didn't seem to mind and Will wouldn't have minded either if not for his last conversation with Mike. He was aware of how painfully tense he was and how rigid Mike was next to him in return, with their warm limbs pressed together on a tiny old couch Mike got from his parents.

Will took an anxious breath and accepted a plate with pizza Dustin was showing at him. The hunger he felt on his way here gave way to a sick feeling in his stomach, and Will, unable to stop being aware of Mike's sweater-covered arm brushing against his own as he took little bites, of Mike's breath next to him, of Mike's familiar smell that was uniquely him—and embedded so deeply in his being, that if he were to recognise Mike only by smell in a crowd full of strangers, he would still be able to distinguish between Mike and the others—of the warmth and the flusteredness the closeness was giving him, to the point of him feeling hot in his own sweater—and he was so rarely hot anymore, not after disappearing in the Upside Down—tried to sit still, to remember what was probably going to be the last time he got to do this.

His almost unseeing eyes finally focused and Will saw Selena looking at him inquiringly, eyebrows raised.

"Everything alright?" Will asked her, among the chatter of others, unwilling to be asked the same thing first.

"Yes, and you?"

Will nodded at her and resumed his attempts at listening to others,

noting how silent Mike was next to him, his thigh pressing into Will's further whenever Mike straightened to reach for a glass of water on the table.

To be able to touch him, albeit inadvertently, for the first time in a long time, was excruciating. The fragility and temporality of the moment of now—over in the matter of hours, if not minutes, never to be seen again—left Will empty and hollow. It wasn't time to feel it, Will knew, so he tried to feed on the closeness soon to be gone, didn't shy away from it anymore but took full presence on the couch, pressing back instead of pulling back. The subtle shift didn't go unnoticed by Mike who still refused to turn his head even just to shoot him an icy glare and just did the same until their unyielding bodies were pulled so tight against each other, their shared body heat made both of their cheeks flush.

The evening went by. Will, whenever he could focus enough on the others, tried to dissuade them from asking Selena too many questions. Soon, Dustin and Lucas learned she could draw and were asking her to draw their portrait together while Jane and Max demanded it should be them instead.

Just when they almost convinced her, Mrs Wheeler came to tell them it was time to go home.

"We should probably tidy up a bit before we go," Max said and Will felt Mike pull away from him as he got up and nodded in gratitude.

The warmth that he felt until now started to dissipate in the room until he felt almost normal.

Will pushed the plates on top of each other hastily and got up, hurrying to get his coat, lost among others on the chair by the stairs. He needed to get out.

"Jane," Max called. "Could you help me carry the plates upstairs?"

"Sure."

Jane shoved the glasses in Lucas and Selena's hands, making them go with them.

The door closed behind them.

“Are you two okay?” Dustin asked out of nowhere, just as he finished putting pizza boxes together, and was now looking between them. “You both have been quiet all evening.”

Still without a coat in his hands, Will glanced at Mike, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Yeah, we are fine.” Mike smiled at Dustin. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

Will stared at Mike longer than he perhaps should have and nodded, before walking over to where Mike was standing.

“I was just worried about bringing Selena here, that’s all,” Will added, trying his best to put an apologetic smile on.

He didn’t expect Mike to step closer. His heart jumped and started to beat much faster as Mike wrapped a hand around his shoulder. He joined in.

“You didn’t have to worry, it looked like she was enjoying it.”

If Mike could fake it, he was willing to do it too. Ignoring his racing heart, he brought his right hand up and placed it on Mike’s waist, feeling the softness of Mike’s worn jumper.

“Right?”

“Ah, ok. I’m glad,” Dustin answered, looking at them with light suspicion and relief at the same time. “And Selena totally liked us. I can’t wait for her to draw us!”

He grabbed the boxes and walked to the stairs.

“Lucas!” hollered Dustin, climbing them. “You got to bring your bandana next time. Just imagine—“

And disappeared into the corridor.

They stood there, smiles no longer on their faces. Both didn’t move. Will was silently willing Mike to be the first to disentangle himself

because after a couple of hours of the closeness on the couch, when he was so sure he would not get another opportunity again, here it was, and Will, unable to let it go, was claspig at Mike's sweater.

The basement was empty, except for them and Mike's heavy arm around his shoulders that left Will light-headed, almost ready to fall over if Mike were suddenly to let go of him. Will looked up, slowly, noting how after all this time, their height difference was still the same, noting Mike's brown eyes look at him in return.

Their argument, their silence and animosity seemed so distant in this moment, so meaningless, as if Will didn't tell Mike to go fuck himself and heard the same in return just a couple of days before, as if he wasn't still reeling from it when he came here today. But in this moment, he wasn't. Will was willing to forgive Mike months, no, a year of silence, just to have him this close again, just to feel his breath on his face as Mike didn't step away and instead turned to him and pressed closer—

“Max, get our jackets too!”

The door went open and they jumped apart at Max's footsteps.

Will, hazy and unstable, watched Max grab the coats, unable to turn his head to look at Mike's face to see whether he was just as affected by it as he was.

Max picked up the jackets and Will finally saw his coat. Never so unsure of anything in his life, he went to grab it and ran out.

...

Will woke up from an anxious, feverish slumber, tossing and turning all night. Every time he fell asleep Mike was on the edge of his consciousness, sometimes as a thought, an idea, sometimes standing a few feet away. Every time Will tried reaching for him, he woke up a moment later. It kept on and on, like a loop, and eventually morphed into Mike standing over him and saying *I asked if you wanted to be my friend. It was the best thing I've ever done* and Will, unable to move, just watched as tears slid down Mike's cheeks.

After shuffling his feet through the quiet corridor of their house, he blinked blearily in the bathroom mirror, looking at his face. There were dark circles under his eyes that his mom would frown over and urge him to sit down while she made him some chicken noodle soup.

No one was home to make note of his weary appearance. The house reflected the greyness outside and echoed the emptiness, going through Will's almost ghostly, pale body as if Demagorgon was about to reach for him from the Upside Down and finally get him in the dark and cold corridor of his home.

He listened, transfixed, for any movement in the house that would signify he had to run. Run, but where? Was there really a safe place to hide for him?

There was a noise outside. Will didn't move from his place at the end of the corridor but nothing followed. Then, he exhaled and reached for the light switch with his trembling hands.

The change from the dark to the familiar place Will spent his whole life in was instantaneous and relief flooded every cell in his body.

There was a knock on the door.

Will jumped and turned the light off, listening in. Slowly, he crept to the door and stopped in front of it, indecisive. He heard another knock and a quiet, familiar *Damn which made the heart flutter in his chest. He swallowed and reached for the handle, opening the door.*

Mike stood there, his face set in a frown. Instead of saying hi, he raised his hand in a greeting.

"Are you sick?"

Will shook his head.

"No."

“You look tired.”

“You too.”

Mike bit his lip.

Mike, too, looked tired, worn out. Mike was not the type to care about his appearance but the mop of his curly hair was messier than usual.

“I want to talk to you,” Mike said and without waiting for his response, stepped into the house, brushing against him as he walked towards Will’s room.

Will blinked and continued to stand there, bewildered and lost at this display of confidence that Mike carried through the porch. Then he closed the door and walked towards his room, heart hammering in his chest at the prospect of another confrontation.

Mike was pacing among the mess of his room and stopped when he saw Will.

“Why did you say we weren’t friends?” Mike asked, face caught in a painful grimace.

“Is it really not obvious?” he returned. “When was the last time we talked?”

“We talk all the time!”

“No, we don’t!”

Will tried to calm his trembling shoulders. Shouting didn’t help

things.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone? If you don’t want to be my friend, that’s fine.”

Mike opened his mouth to that but didn’t say anything and Will continued, “You don’t have to come here looking for explanations. People change, Mike. You changed.”

“No, Will, it’s you,” Mike said through his teeth. “You changed.”

Will went still. He was afraid of his voice cracking so he asked quietly.

“What do you mean?”

Mike walked closer to him until he stood right in front of him and whispered right to his face. “I saw you on the field.”

The air got sucked out of the room.

Will tried to step back, away from Mike’s space but Mike didn’t let him, he reached for his right wrist and grabbed it. The warm touch of Mike’s hand through Will’s shirt, loose around his wrist, calmed him a little and he didn’t dislodge Mike’s hand, wanting to keep it.

“So what?” he said back quietly, feeling his eyes sting. “Why are you telling me this? What are you going to do about it?”

Mike didn’t stop watching him intently.

“Why did you do it?”

“It’s none of your business.”

Will couldn’t see what Mike wanted from him like this. Did he want a confirmation from Will to tell the others?

Mike drew their arms closer to their chests. He bit his lip again and Will couldn’t help but lower his gaze, captivated as Mike worried his lip with his teeth until the friction and the blood changed its shape and color, made it redder and fuller. He swallowed, distracted and looked back up to see Mike’s pupils dilate.

It, suddenly, somehow, stopped being important if Mike was going to hit him next or never talk to him again. He raised his left hand and covered Mike’s warm hand without letting go of his wrist.

Mike’s breath caught.

“Will,” he said, hoarsely, looking up from staring at their hands. “Tell me. Please.”

He used his left hand to grab Mike’s sweater and rose on his toes, heart hammering in his chest. It was as if Mike was this unmoving weight, frozen beneath his hand and he stayed like that for a moment, Mike not daring to take a breath but not pulling away.

“Mike,” he whispered and licked his lips.

Will could feel the fast beat of Mike’s heart beneath his hand. He didn’t know if Mike was scared or if he wanted this. Mike didn’t push him away yet, he waited for him to do something and for once, Will knew it had to be him who had to take the next step, the one that would reshape their lives. He could feel it through a desperate clutch of Mike’s hand on his wrist, through the expression Mike’s face wore, scared and pleading, the face he learned to read so well over the years.

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against Mike's.

Mike didn't pull away. He stood there, unmoving, as Will kissed him and Will, his whole being already light-headed from the closeness he desired for so long and finally got, didn't instantly pull away. A moment later, his stomach dropped and he did, apology ready on his lips.

Before he could speak, Mike intervened. He released his wrist and raised both of them to gently grasp Will's neck, holding it tenderly, angling it up and pressing his lips back to Will's, opening them slightly.

In the small space of his chilly room, Mike guided him, opened his own mouth and moved it slowly, leading him through the kiss. It went on for a minute or two or five—time warped from the existence, the universe collapsed to the point of singularity and exploded anew, giving birth to a new reality where Mike liked Will back.

They separated, still standing close, unable to resist the gravity pull of their attraction. Will wrapped his hands around Mike's waist, afraid of what would happen if they both stepped back and thought about what happened, and pressed his forehead into Mike's cheek.

"I'm sorry," Mike whispered, barely audible, and pressed a kiss to his forehead, wrapping his arms around Will's shoulders.

"For what?" he mumbled into Mike's neck.

"For pulling away, for not being there. I was so crazy about El that I forgot about everything else. And I thought that if you have a crush on someone, like me, it would be fine." Mike's voice cracked. "But you didn't, and by the time I realised how much time had passed, everything was strange between us and I didn't know how to fix it."

Will raised his head and watched as a tear slid down Mike's cheek. Torn between sadness for Mike and lightness he felt from the whole situation being acknowledged, recognised and not brushed away, from Mike suffering from it as much as he did, torn between gladness that Mike felt it and sadness because he didn't want Mike to suffer, he gently wiped the tear away with his lips.

"And it didn't work out with El. I mean. We will always love each other but she had spent so much time without a normal life that she didn't know how to live, what to want and she wanted to be on her own. And I couldn't stop thinking that I destroyed our friendship and I hated it so much when I thought you moved on and started dating Selena...And then I saw you on the field and didn't know what to think anymore."

"Mike, I couldn't stop thinking about you this whole time. As much as I tried, whatever I did, it didn't work. You were always there." It was his turn to cry. "I was so angry at you. Before. And then when I realised that you might never speak to me again, I couldn't stand it."

Another tear slid down Mike's cheek. He drew Will closer and confessed, "I'm sorry I neglected you as my friend. It was the worst thing I've ever done."

"I'm glad you are here now."

"I guess I will have to make it up to you," Mike said, before softly kissing his mouth.

Will snorted into the kiss with a small nod and held him tighter.

Author's Note:

I welcome literary criticism if anyone feels like writing some.

Otherwise, here is my [tumblr](#). My Ask is always open to prompts, comments and questions.

Happy New Year y'all!